

*From the Dubuque Telegraph Herald, February 2, 2011*

Workers from across the tri-states stood on the factory floor as sparks whizzed through the air and machines the size of school buses pounded metal.

U.S. Rep. Bruce Braley, D-Iowa, toured Peosta-based Premier Tooling and Manufacturing Inc. Monday morning. The plant started about 20 years ago with fewer than 10 employees. Today, the business employs 140 workers, with clients as close as other factories in the Peosta Industrial Park and as far away as Mexico and Europe.

But lately, the sinking economy and pressure from foreign competition has worried Jan and Jim Heister, who serve as president and vice president, respectively, of the company. Their biggest challenges include finding skilled workers, such as engineers, and losing business overseas, issues that have closed other factories in Iowa.

"Most of the equipment you see in our plant has come from auctions. And that's devastating," Jim Heister said. "It breaks my heart to go to auctions and see the employees breaking down because they don't have a job."

Braley said he wants the federal government to get tougher on Chinese currency manipulation and devise a national manufacturing strategy to boost American manufacturing.

He's also pushing to extend the Back to Work Act, which gives tax credits to businesses that hire unemployed workers. Premier Tooling and Manufacturing benefited from the program, which expired Dec. 31.

"American manufacturers can compete with anyone in the world, as long as there's a level playing field," Braley said.

But Jan Heister said that the odds are stacked against them as they struggle to fill positions requiring special skills and customers demand "unrealistic" price cuts.

"It's been a struggle trying to find a good labor pool because our customers are so demanding," Jan Heister said. "They want perfection and they don't want to spend very much on it."

Jim Heister said that some Chinese firms have bid on projects for less than material cost. If countries like China continue subsidizing industry to levels below cost, Heister said that American jobs will continue to disappear.

"They're real vultures," he said. "It used to be when I started in this business 20 years ago, I could take my pickup and go down the road and find a job. Today those jobs aren't there."

Braley said he's advocating for a national manufacturing strategy to examine tax and trade

policy with input from the private sector.

"It looks at how the government utilizes its own massive spending powers to emphasize 'make it in America,'" he said. "I can tell you that there's been a great deal of interest in putting this whole package together and thinking about how this country competes in a global marketplace on a manufacturing level.

"We have to wake up to this reality."